

## Rilke And Rodin: Mind, Eye And Hand

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*“For two thousand years life had held this body in its hands and had moulded it, had forged it, now listening, now hammering, night and day.”*

- Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*

## Introduction

Are words above materiality? Or is materiality above words? These questions are not easy to answer, or even to ask. This essay will try to ask them in direct connection to the relationship between August Rodin and Rainer Maria Rilke. By omitting any kind of hierarchical relationship that has been discussed between the two (Paulsen, 1943), I will instead trace the difference between words and images in the two artists. Three thematic sections will be touched upon, *mind*, *eye* and *hand*. The themes deal with the connection between intellect and body and will enable a discussion on the primacy of either words or images. By following the development of Rodin's influence upon Rilke it will become clear that although Rilke found many images in Rodin a difference remained with regards to mental images. That difference, I will argue, made Rilke struggle immensely with his own art, yet enabled him to transcend all fixed materiality.

## I. Mind

*“Rodin's message and its significance are little understood by the many men who gathered about him. It would be a long and weary task to enlighten them [...]”* (Rilke, 8).

On what does the mind operate if not on ideas that come from the surrounding world. Looked at objectively that world is a world we all share. If a conclusion were to be drawn from those statements it would be the following: the mind operates on ideas from an objectively known world. How, then, could the problem of enlightenment emerge as posed by Rilke with regards to his friend Rodin?

Is the idea of reality mentioned above manifested in the mind of the artist? Or is it merely a reflection on a scientific model of apprehension? In his essay *Eye And Mind* Merlau-Ponty addressed this problem aiming exactly at those Rilke felt to be a “long and weary task to enlighten”. Describing the scientific model of thinking he urges for a “return to “there is” which precedes it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies [...] (122)”. That “there is” in a “humanly modified world” is the universe in which Rodin moves and a universe transferred onto his younger friend Rilke.

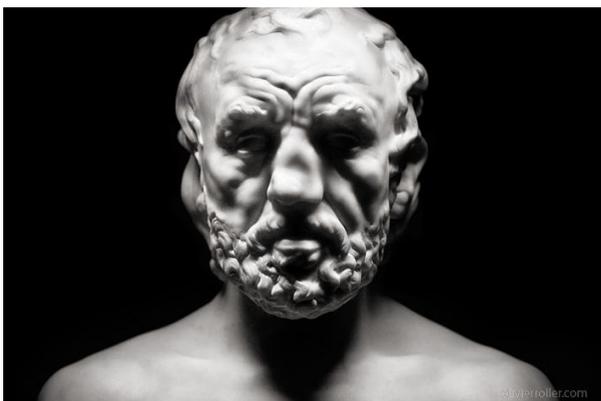
“There is” leaves open the possibility for a first whiff of an idea to arrive from a gesture, a scent, a texture etc., which will plant itself firmly in the mind of the creator. Nowhere else do the seeds of creation grow so well. As the seat of theoretical

knowledge once an idea has been planted it can grow, finding nurture from the manifold crevices each containing forms ready to be actualized. The Rodin of Rilke is a man who has guarded the plantation of those ideas in the mind with the utmost care, never taking one step pre-maturely for risk of losing some crucial aspect from the fullness of the idea to be actualized;

He began with the seed beneath the earth, as it were. And this seed grew downward, sunk deep its roots and anchored them before it began to shoot upward in the form of a young sprout. This required time, time that lengthened into years. "One must not hurry," said Rodin to the few friends who gathered about him, in answer to their urgency (Rilke, 16).

Emerging from this view of mind is a notion that denies conceptual priority over the sensible world. It is a mind in which images are allowed to grow until they reach a state of urgent conception through the tools of the artist – the hands. Of this Rilke writes; “[t]he impressions do not change within it but accustom themselves to their dwelling-place and rise from it into his hands as though they were the natural gestures of these hands” (54). Rendering the mind sensible also means rendering it material, which in turn welcomes manipulation. Through the hands of the artist manipulation becomes possible resulting in the simultaneous weakness and strength against the scientific mind-set. This Janus-like movement is seen in Rilke, through his words, and Rodin, through his sculpture, as a distortion and amplification of their subject-matter. Here illustrated in an excerpt from Rilke ambiguously telling of Rodin’s youth:

He is a man rich in years; and his life is one that cannot be related. It began and still continues; stretches out deeply into a great age, and to us, it seems as though it had passed many hundreds of years ago. It perhaps had a childhood; a childhood in poverty—dark, groping and uncertain (9).



The passage leaves the reader in doubt of whether or not this image of childhood is phantasy or actuality, while simultaneously redeeming any potential falsehood in virtue of the

style it is written. Leading the reader to disregard truth as the indicating value of goodness, but rather literary audacity, or in short – beauty. The same movement is manifested in Rodin's "L'homme au Nez Cassé".

A man is exposed with all his flaws and inconsistencies, yet the beauty of its execution and care traverses beyond the main trait of the nose, it even transcends the title which acts as the antithesis to what beauty should be. What Rodin does in sculpture Rilke does in words, namely the transgression of preconceived ideals governing the structure of judgment.

## II. Eye

We have just seen that for Rilke and Rodin the mind becomes a material vehicle for ripening of ideas to occur. Those same ideas, whence do they emerge? Or rather, which sense organ is the receptacle of the form to be actualized? We have already seen that the hands prevail in the execution of the artwork, a point we will return to later, but what about the delineation of the figure? When tracing a building with our eyes, or imagining a person with our inner eye the contour made seems to be self-contained. By gathering all the surfaces of the things the trace is made according to the perfection of the things seen or thought of, or, more accurately, is made as an absolute knowledge which keeps oozing perfection due to its invariable landscape. One glimpses the act of this when Rilke writes:

It must not demand nor expect aught from outside, it should refer to nothing that lay beyond it, see nothing that was not within itself; its environment must lie within its own boundaries (27-28).

The attitude of seeing as an absolute knowledge leads one to think of Henri Bergson when he writes "the absolute is perfect in that it is perfectly what it is" (135). The absolute perfection here adhering to the method of sight that transports one to the inside of an object, in short, to an intuition of the object (16). Furthermore, it directly unveils the artistic genius of Rodin, of which Rilke sees. Due to the difficulty of practising the type of perception as seeing 'from within the object' Tubach subtly notes that Rilke "felt frequently that he failed to satisfy the demands which the writing of poetry made on him" (242). In Rilke's own words the admiration for this ability in Rodin is made lucid,

If doubts or uncertainties assailed him, [...] these influences found in him a quiet, erect resistance, a defiance, a strength and confidence—all the not-yet-unfurled flags of a great victory (20).

The sight, as has been laid out above, becomes the medium in which inanimate objects come alive, be it marble or words. The struggle Rilke found himself in was how to transform words into living beings, a struggle quite different from Rodin's who already had the material in front of him. For Rilke the conjuring up of words that could come alive in the mind of the reader was the main point of research, a research that took as its point of departure lessons learned from Rodin – the human body.

### III. Hand

In poetry and sculpture creation emerges from the hand. Materials differ, yet the craft is brought forth via the sensitivity of the fingers and palms. It is as if the hand embodies the mind as well as the body and is the giver of shape. The shape that is outlined does not necessarily represent a whole figure, but rather fragments that seem to symbolize the essence of a whole being, letting go of the superfluous parts that sums up the whole, focusing only on the most important ones. One sees this in Rodin's art, especially his torsos, his figures from the *Gate of Hell* and the works of separate body parts, such as hands and feet. The same is seen in Rilke, especially in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, as Scholz notes when she writes that Rilke is interested in the dismemberment of the body and its physicality as a means of transcending the individual (71). This action of fragmentation is clearly seen in *The Notebooks*; “[n]ow you have gathered yourself up; you see your own end before you, in your own hands; every now and then, with an imprecise movement, you trace the contours of your face.” (43). The hands that cannot hold together one's own identity is the same fragmentation in Rodin, taken one step further. Here it is no longer a question of representation or beauty, but rather about how one can no longer ‘hold oneself in one's own hands’, in other words, the identity of the poet as creator is constantly evading him since he cannot maintain his own persona. This also seems to signify a main difference between Rodin and Rilke; while the sculptor defines himself and his ideas through material objects the poet only has his mental images to rely on through a medium which he himself is the author of – words.

The inspiration for the poet's evading of himself seems nevertheless to have come from the visual imprints of Rodin. Rilke devotes to Rodin the visual correspondence in his sculptures to the literary and bodily experience of man losing sight of aims and meaning in life when he writes that "[m]an's movements have become more hesitating" (*Rodin*, 40). The hesitation found in life is picked up by Rodin in his work and takes on a greater meaning for Rilke as he sees these 'hesitating movements' in Rodin's sculptures. The same movements Rilke saw in his daily life are now cut-out in stone and the hand that made them is at the same time the hand of the 'hesitating man', namely himself.

### Conclusion

The question whether images are above words or vice versa was posed in the beginning. Did we manage to answer it? Probably not, and probably it is an impossible task. Yet it needs to be asked of us. All of us are affected by material images; how do we render them mental and how much does imagination have to do with the process. Did Rilke conjure up his own fancies based on Rodin's perception of objects and the human body, or did he see something eternal that words had yet to master? I believe he saw the latter. Rilke found a way to touch upon the eternity of materiality by transforming them into mental images that we can all share. He did not submit to a fleeting idealism of images but rather persevered with and through the materiality of the objects and bodies of his words rendering them just as vivid and ambiguous today as they were when he wrote them.

Ambiguousness and vivacity are also keywords that our senses submit to. For that very same reason the focus on *mind*, *eye* and *hand* has been put to the fore in order to show that as sentient beings we can choose to see wholes or parts. We are all subject to our own phantasms which haunt our minds incessantly, of perceptions which thwart simple objects into demons of the night or heavenly saviors. Never is our mind at rest from the impressions of the world. All we are left with are multiple methods of interpretation.

The difference in Rilke's interpretation is that he involved not only the mind but also the very essence of our materiality – the touch of the hand – and showed its elusiveness where his friend Rodin was bound by another medium wholly material.

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## Images

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1. *The Hand of God*, 1896?, Auguste Rodin. Photo: Christian Baraja. Property of Musée Rodin.
2. *L'homme au Nez Cassé*, 1864-65, Auguste Rodin. Photo: Olivier Roller. Property of Musée Réattu.